recto et verso

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by brechtian

Summary

It’s six months after Hinata’s return to Japan when Kageyama asks him about it.

Notes

This fic was written for taldoren on tumblr, who requested a story centered around recursion and mise en abyme. I hope to have done those themes justice!

(Trigger warning for depictions of spiders.)

See the end of the work for more notes

Thus to say "I hate" or "I love" on the occasion of a singular consciousness of attraction or repulsion, is to carry out a veritable passage to the infinite. (Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*)

– 🕷 –

It's six months after Hinata's return to Japan when Kageyama asks him about it.

If he's being honest, Hinata kind of expected him to ignore it altogether, an intentional lapse of memory in the name of greater harmony. But he's wrong. Of course he is. It's only half-surprising. Kageyama was never one overly concerned with harmony, after all.

They're not drinking (they rarely do), but it's late, and the way fatigue settles behind the eyes and softens the mind could be considered a sort of drunkenness. It feels that way, at least, in this moment, the television buzzing with droning chatter and blurs of movement; some old SuperLega match Kageyama put on an hour ago.

So it could be the late hour, or the hypnotism of the TV's glow, or the way the age of this secondhand couch seems to have absorbed the distance between the two of them until there's at most ten millimeters of space separating their thighs.

Whatever the reason, when the whistle marking the end of the third set blows, Kageyama turns his head to look at Hinata and asks in all his baritone, monotonous glory: "Whatever happened between you and Oikawa in Brazil?"

(Ah, shit. Should've seen this one coming.)

(Really, what *didn't* happen in Brazil?)

"You're going to have to be more specific," Hinata says, because he knows that Kageyama *doesn't* know that's what people say when they're stalling for time.

"Like… you know."

"I know what?"

"The…" Kageyama looks in the opposite direction of Hinata, where there's nothing to meet his eyes but painted drywall. "The photo. I mean, the selfie. The Instagram posts. You seemed close."

"We were close."

"Okay, well." A twitch, a tell flickering in the corner of Kageyama's mouth, discomfort and annoyance. He'd be terrible at poker; Hinata's always thought so. "How close?"

Ah. Hm.

"Ah. Hm."

Silence.

“What does that mean?” asks Kageyama.

“It’s kind of a long story.”

“That’s fine.”

Stupid Kageyama and his stupid questions. Since when does he care about this sort of thing, anyway? He’s supposed to have nothing on the brain except volleyball and that weird cuticle oil he’s always putting on his nails, making his fingers smell faintly of citrus. Not that Hinata’s making a point of sniffing his hands. He just, you know. Noticed. Platonically.

“I don’t really know where to start.”

“Your meeting on the beach?”

“You already know about that.”

Kageyama has turned back to him now, no longer preoccupied with the eggshell paint job of Hinata’s apartment. “Fine. What don’t I know?”

“Plenty.”

“Hinata.”

“Okay, okay. Um. Well. I bought him dinner that first evening, for starters.”

“Dinner?”

“Yeah. Paella, I think.”

– 🕷 –

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. 2015. A little hole-in-the-wall establishment, the kind of place that seems to constitute 90% of a big city’s restaurant scene, with scuffed tile floors and flickering fluorescents. It’d be called “a hidden gem” by tourists, if it’s called anything at all. The room is packed with small tables and bodies that smell of sea salt. A spider skitters across the floor, avoiding the light.

Center stage, HINATA SHOUYOU and OIKAWA TOORU sit eating and sharing large plates of colorful paella, saffron and fresh vegetables and even fresher seafood filling the air with fragrant warmth.

HINATA: So.

OIKAWA: Mm?

HINATA: You do this with every boy you pick up on the beach?

OIKAWA: Do what?

HINATA: You know. Get him to buy you dinner.

OIKAWA: *Get* him? You make it sound like I held you at gunpoint. You're the one who offered.

HINATA: Okay, wait, no; you literally told me I'm paying. In exchange for you playing beach with me later.

OIKAWA: That's not how I remember it.

HINATA: It was an hour ago!

OIKAWA: Exactly. Which is why I'd know. I asked if you knew any good places, and you said "Absolutely, my treat." Verbatim, from the horse's mouth.

HINATA: No way. No, no way.

OIKAWA: Yes way.

HINATA: I'm *telling* you—

– 🕷 –

"That's not how it went at all," Oikawa interrupts him over the phone.

"Huh?"

"You've got this story all switched around."

Hinata stops on the street, looking around as though whatever block of Tokyo he's on (shaded with looming buildings and their barely-legible faded signs) will give him the answers he's searching for. "What are you talking about?"

"You didn't pay for dinner. I paid for dinner."

"That's… That can't be right. I remember—"

"No; I for sure did. You lost your wallet that day. You told me so."

"Oh, shit."

"You cried about it and everything."

"I. I forgot about that."

"Clearly."

Nearby, a streetlight turns from red to green, and a long line of cars begin to slowly inch forward, the eternal torpid procession of city traffic. "…Huh."

"And now Tobio-chan's walking around telling people I made a poor, starving delivery boy buy me dinner."

"Please. Who would he even tell?"

"People. His adoring fans. I don't know!"

"He doesn't talk to people."

"He talks to you."

"I'm the exception."

"Aren't you always?"

Hinata laughs, something dry and ironic, but doesn't answer. "What's the big deal, anyways? God forbid someone thinks the great Oikawa Tooru might be *selfish*."

"Hey now."

"And I did buy you dinner. At some point. I remember that much."

"Yeah, sure, maybe. Probably."

A stranger on the street bumps into Hinata, shooting him a dirty look at they pass, probably annoyed that he's standing in the middle of the sidewalk like a lost tourist. Which he's not, not in the proper sense of the term, but in a way he still somehow is, just a bit. A man displaced. A boy a little too far from home. Whatever home's supposed to mean anymore. "Wait, alright. How do *you* remember that day, then?"

"Well, we weren't eating paella, for one."

– 🕷 –

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. 2015. A quaint restaurant, one with mismatched colorful lamps and wooden floors. At a hightop center stage, OIKAWA and HINATA sit eating artfully plated meat and vegetable kebobs. A waitress passes behind them, empty metal platter in hand. A spider, unseen, crouches in a ceiling corner.

OIKAWA: Okay, be honest with me. I won't judge.

HINATA: Huh?

OIKAWA: Did you set this whole thing up?

HINATA: Sorry?

OIKAWA: No need to play coy. I get it, I have fans.

HINATA: I have literally no idea what you're talking about.

OIKAWA: C'mon. I post about my team visiting Rio on Instagram, and an hour later you just *happen* to be on the exact same beach, playing volleyball?

HINATA: I'm there every day.

OIKAWA: Of course you are.

HINATA: I'm serious.

OIKAWA: I'm flattered, honestly. Always good to know I made a proper impression on my opponents—even if it *was* high school. Home never seems small until you leave it. But you already know all that.

HINATA: Look, dude; I just live here. Moved a few months back. But it's nice seeing a familiar face, someone else from Miyagi. It gets exhausting speaking Portuguese all the time. Scrambles my brain up. I never got stress headaches 'til moving to Rio.

OIKAWA: I didn't know you were the shy type.

HINATA: I'm not.

OIKAWA: Then just admit you're obsessed with me~

HINATA: I'm *not*. Didn't even know you played in Argentina.

OIKAWA: Bullshit.

HINATA: Like, it's cool! I think it's super sick that you do! But I didn't know until you told me.

OIKAWA: Nobody at Seijoh mentioned it?

HINATA: Um, I might've heard you'd left the country? Potentially? Didn't see Seijoh much after you graduated. I was focused on other things.

OIKAWA: Like what?

HINATA: Like whatever setter I was actually playing against in the moment. Never good to get stuck in the past; you gotta look at the opponent right there in front of you.

OIKAWA: Hmm.

HINATA: What?

OIKAWA: You're what, twenty now?

HINATA: Nineteen. Twenty in a few days.

OIKAWA: You were sixteen in my head.

HINATA: Alright?

OIKAWA: I mean, that's when I last saw you. So whenever I thought or heard about Hinata Shouyou, I always imagined this scrappy kid from Karasuno who had a lot more talent than he did finesse.

HINATA: Talent?

OIKAWA: But that's not you anymore, is it?

HINATA: …No.

OIKAWA: Yeah. Yeah, you're not a kid at all, are you? Just look at those arms.

HINATA: Wait. Are you hitting on me?

OIKAWA: Is it working?

HINATA: I didn't know you were gay.

OIKAWA: Wh— Are you serious?

HINATA: I *told* you, I haven't kept up with your life. That's none of my business.

OIKAWA: Huh.

HINATA: Mm.

OIKAWA: Okay. Well. What about you, then?

HINATA: What about me?

OIKAWA: You had that thing with my junior, didn't you?

HINATA: Ummm.

OIKAWA: It was kind of gross, watching Tobio so clearly favor you. Like, yeesh, get a room. Keep it off the court.

HINATA: Uhhhhhhhhhhh.

– 🕷 –

"He talked about me?" Kageyama asks, interrupting for the first time, leaning forward.

"Eugh; you two are the exact same."

"No, we're not."

“Yes, you are. Completely obsessed with the other. Always trying to eke out information and pretending you’re not. I know you watch each other’s matches.”

“I don’t care about Oikawa-san.”

“Be serious.”

“I am.”

“Oh my god. You’re impossible.”

“I didn’t think he’d mention me.”

“Of *course* he mentioned you.”

Kageyama frowns, taps those citrus-scented fingers on the fabric of his sweatpants. He seems more alert now than he was before, the story shaking off the lethargy that’d previously settled into his bones. “What did you tell him?”

“About what?”

“About us.”

“That’s. Um. Don’t recall.”

“Oh.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

On the television, the fourth set is coming to an end. It’s looking like the two teams will tie up, going into a dreaded fifth set. Kageyama doesn’t appear to care. All he does is stare at Hinata, intense, body coiled with tension like a loaded spring, potential energy all the way down to his toes.

“Kageyama, dude, you’re freaking me out.”

“What happened after?”

“After what?”

“The dinner.”

“With Oikawa?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Well…”

– 🕷 –

It's the summer of 2015, and you're a waitress at a casual eatery in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It's not a seedy hole-in-the-wall, and it's not a trendy date spot. It's clean, with bright overhead lights and counters that smell faintly of bleach, but the food is consistently good and more affordable than the neighboring restaurants. Most days, you get a lot of blue-collar workers, retirees, and broke young people in never-ending rotation through those front double doors.

The couple sitting at the closest table in your periphery falls under the latter category. They seem broad, though—physically, that is; muscled and a bit more attractive than average, if you took the time to really look. Which you don't.

Athletes, maybe. Probably from one of the universities around here; they seem the right age. But they're not speaking Portuguese when you pass by. International students, then? Rio's got plenty of those, too.

On the plates in front of them are large servings of saffron rice, meat, and grilled vegetables. Your restaurant doesn't serve paella, and nobody ever really orders the kebob. Not that either of those facts are particularly relevant in this moment. But they might be, one day. You wouldn't know. You'll probably have forgotten all this by the time it matters, anyway.

You think they're just friends, at first; two guys grabbing dinner after practice. But then one reaches over and takes the other's hand, charismatic and flirtatious, murmuring something low in a language you don't understand but a tone that's unmistakable.

Oh my. Best give them some space.

The couple gets up soon after that, paying in cash like good customers always should. None of that plastic card reader crap. Too easy to track, too easy to tax, as your boss always says.

As they exit, you notice the shorter one has his hand on the small of the other's back, subtly guiding him, which strikes you as funny even though it shouldn't be, really. Not like height means much of anything. Not like it's your business to begin with.

You wipe down their table with a cloth (skimming a little of the cash left behind as you do), clock out of your shift, and forget any of this ever happened by the time you wake up the next day.

– 🕷 –

"So what'd you tell him?" Oikawa asks through the phone speaker, a little too smug for his own good. Hinata can practically see the look on his face, all delight and petty pride. It's probably Christmas for him, hearing about this big victory over Kageyama at last coming to light.

Oikawa Tooru. An asshole? Certainly. But that's not the sort of thing that ever really bothered Hinata. For better or for worse, he's always had a soft spot for the off-putting geniuses of the world. Someone has to.

“Nothing much. Just that we were, you know. Involved.”

“Involved?”

– 🕷 –

“How involved?”

“Kageyama!”

“What?”

“You can’t just ask somebody that!”

“Why not?”

“Because! Because you probably don’t want to know the answer!”

“I asked.”

“Okay?”

“I asked to get an answer, so I want to know the answer.”

“It’s… we were…” Hinata motions vaguely, tries to sink even deeper into the fabric of the couch, hoping it might let him disappear altogether, another speck of dust on the oxidated leather. “It’s hard to explain.”

“Try.”

“We… God, are you really going to make me say it?”

“Are you in love with him?”

“Am I— Jesus, can you ask anything roughly ten degrees less complicated?”

“What’s a *degree* of complication?”

“Whatever the hell this is.”

“Are you dating?” Kageyama asks, leaning his head back against the couch to squint up at the ceiling. “Right now, I mean.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I’m not *anything* with anybody.”

“So you and Oikawa aren’t…?”

“We’re—” Hinata stops, exhales, squeezes his eyes shut. “We’re not dating. How could we? He’s in fucking Argentina.”

“Do you want to be?”

“In Argentina?”

“Dating.”

“Since when do you care about any of this?”

“Since when do *you*?”

And it’s a reasonable question to ask, honestly. Life was volleyball, *is* volleyball. It’s about perfecting nasty jump-serves, passing cleanly, spiking powerfully. It’s about how fast he can get a ball of leather-clad rubber from the palm of his hand down into the gymnasium floor.

It’s about…

He and Kageyama were different from the others, back in high school. They didn’t care about test scores, or girls, or really anything that wasn’t directly related to winning nationals; being the best. They cared about each other, maybe, a bit. A little more each year. Everyone who knew them called them best friends, but Hinata doesn’t remember himself or Kageyama ever making the title official. They were just… each other. Teammates, rivals, Karasuno. That’s all they ever needed to be.

Kageyama taps his socked feet against the carpet, frowns, and repeats himself: “Since when do you?”

When. When did it start? When did he start to care? When was the first time Hinata thought *I want this man* and then acted on it? Not a repressed crush, but a real, actual expression of desire? The beginning of the end?

– 🕷 –

“I didn’t know you were gay,” Hinata tells Oikawa without thinking.

There are exactly 0.83 seconds between the sound dying on Hinata’s lips and the initiating vibration of Oikawa’s response. Many things are true in these 0.83 seconds—some of which may no longer remain by the end—and if he were able to condense time down into one single, solid unit of measurement, something he could feel between his fingers and hold up to the light, then within that speck or grain or granule or whatever it’d be called, everything in the universe would be frozen, preserved. A snapshot of eternity. The here and now before it slips away into the next.

Maybe if he could do that, could look at a moment from every possible angle before acting, he could go back and redo it all grain by grain, second by second. That way, he’d always be able to say exactly what he meant, when he meant it.

As is, it's not surprising that Hinata doesn't fully process what he's going to say before he says it. Much of communication functions thusly.

(There's this dominant mode of thought in Western philosophy that speech is the closest expression of the "true" self we have, whatever that self is; that there's the least amount of interference between consciousness and verbalization. *Phonocentrism* is what it's called, this idea that speech is defined by privileged presence whereas writing is *absence*: the subordinated, the binary opposite, the *verso*.

And what harm ever came from binaries and hierarchies, right?)

So, without thinking, Hinata tells Oikawa over a lifechanging dinner neither of them will properly remember in three years' time that he didn't know Oikawa was gay.

The thoughts he doesn't manage to get out in as timely of a manner are as follows:

1. That makes a lot of sense.
2. Is that why you and Kageyama were so…
3. I think I'm probably gay, too. Haven't had a chance to test it out yet.

But Oikawa's talking before Hinata can say any of these things, distracting him with questions about Kageyama and body language that's not-so-subtly leaning in to get as close as possible.

(A small jumping spider crawls up the corner of the room, silently stalking a resting fly. Nobody sees it, but it sees everybody. The fly most of all.)

Somewhere along the line, between dodging accusations and volleying flirtations, Hinata thinks it, clear and crystal, the strokes of characters vivid in his mind:

I want him.

Hinata wants him, wants Oikawa, wants the grand king that Kageyama once idolized and who's now buying his food and brushing his arm with long, setter fingers. He wants Oikawa to take him home, to make him forget all his problems, and it's the first time in weeks he can remember wanting *anything* besides survival and self-improvement.

So he grabs Oikawa's hand, leans in close, and tells him exactly that—soft breath warm in the shell of his ear.

– 🕷 –

It's unclear how Kageyama responds to all of this. Or, at least, the amount of it that Hinata is willing to share.

It is unclear because you are a jumping spider, as native to Tokyo as you are Brazil, the invertebrate with the best vision in the animal kingdom. There is a beetle on the wall you desperately want to eat, black and shiny and half the size of yourself. Easy money.

There are also two figures behind you, moving. You don't know the details. Your good eyes, the ones that move inside your head and gauge just how far you need to jump to lock arms around your prey, are currently trained on the beetle.

But the other eyes, the ones evolved to detect light and movement and not much else, notify you of something happening from behind.

Don't worry. Nothing dangerous to you. Just humans doing their thing, whatever that thing might be.

You don't know the difference between hatred and love because you are a spider. Your nervous system is quite simple. But you do know curiosity, and hunger, and reproduction.

You know that you will sink your fangs into the exoskeleton of this beetle to paralyze and eat it, one bite at a time. It will digest in your alimentary canal, converting to energy inside you so that you may live longer to kill more beetles and make even more energy, until eventually one of the humans on the couch will finally notice you, little bugger that you are. They will gently slide you onto a receipt, take you outside, then shake you off to rejoin the world you came from.

And then the streetlight will turn green, and the torpid procession will inch. And a waitress in Rio will decide to quit her job before her boss can fire her. And the charismatic setter for Club Atletico San Juan will read about how philosophically subordinating writing, or darkness, or absence, or anything else for that matter implies an epistemological truth at the heart of existence that probably isn't really there to begin with. How our understanding of our own lives is shaky even at the best of times.

And, finally, at the end of it all, the figures on the couch will crumble to dust. Or maybe just place you on the ground outside. You can never really tell the difference.

(But first, there's a beetle to catch.)

End Notes

Many thanks again to taldoren on tumblr! You can also follow me on tumblr at rosebrides!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!